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The Prairie Ph.D.: A New Model for Tribal Graduate Education

Abstract

A cohort of tribal college faculty and tribal professionals are working toward graduate degrees in the biological sciences through a collaborative program nicknamed the "Prairie Ph.D." Results to date show promise for graduate education targeted at American Indian communities. Program history, approach, and formative evaluation are discussed.

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Need

The need for development opportunities for tribal college faculty and tribal professionals is well documented. As challenges facing indigenous communities become more complex, and as tribal colleges seek to expand their offerings, opportunities for graduate education should be expanded. However, numerous obligations prohibit many working tribal faculty and professionals from enrolling in traditional graduate programs. Innovative distance education programs aimed at working with professionals exist in disciplines such as education and business. However, few models are found in the natural sciences; fewer still are designed around the interests and concerns of tribal professionals.

South Dakota State University has collaborated with tribal colleges in the region for more than a decade. Recently, tribal college faculty approached the university calling for a program that would serve their needs and allow them to complete masters and doctoral degrees in the biological sciences.

Program Overview

Nineteen students were admitted into the program which began in August 2003. Of these, eight are American Indian, and twelve work at tribal colleges. All are employed in reservation communities. Several aspects of the Prairie Ph.D. program make it unique. These include:

- Cohort Model—Students move through their curriculum together. This approach has helped create bonds of friendship and support among students, and has ensured adequate course enrollment.

- **Diversified Curriculum**—As tribal professionals are often generalists, students' coursework has drawn on numerous disciplines in the biological sciences. Core coursework has been supplemented with more specialized offering from SDSU and collaborating institutions.
- **Delivery Methods**—Courses have been delivered entirely over the Internet, through intensive short courses, web-assisted courses, and courses delivered over interactive television.
- **Cultural Inclusion**—American Indian issues and cultural perspectives have been integrated into the curriculum. An international study tour for the cohort took students to Bolivia where they learned, taught, and developed relationships with indigenous institutions serving peasant farmers in Bolivia's Andes Mountains.
- **Reservation-Based Research**—Students' research projects are located on reservations and designed with the needs of these communities in mind.

Barriers to Success

Initially, the program encountered numerous institutional barriers. Some faculty resisted the broaderbased approach. Others questioned whether or not a quality program in the sciences could be delivered offcampus using the methods described above. Strong administrative leadership along with passionate program advocates allowed coordinators to take the risks involved in establishing the program. In a survey of students and faculty, the following issues were more commonly cited as barriers to success:

- **Lack of Time**—Students (all of whom are working professionals) indicated that balancing coursework with their career and family responsibilities were exceedingly difficult.
- **Communications Difficulties**—With students off-campus, informal interaction between faculty and students rarely happens. Because they do not regularly see one another, faculty and students must be intentional about communicating program information, along with questions, problems and other issues that may arise.
- **Logistical Issues**—Scheduling courses that require participants to spend extended, intensive amounts of time together is challenging and resource intensive. Similarly, scheduling graduate committee meetings is complicated, as are faculty visits to student research sites.
- **Technological Problems**—With students located in three different states, in remote communities with varying levels of access to high-speed internet and satellite reception, technology-based course delivery has sometimes been problematic.

Though time and resource intensive, several agencies, foundations and private donors have provided scholarships, and research assistantships, and support for travel and supplies.

Results to Date

Since August, 2003, more than 50 credits of graduate coursework have been offered. One student graduated with her MS in Biological Sciences, Spring, 2005, and several others are scheduled to graduate in December, 2005. The programs first Ph.D. graduates are anticipated in 2006. In a survey at the conclusion of the project's first year, 88 percent

indicated that they were “very satisfied” with the program faculty and staff, major advisors and graduate committees. Ninety-nine percent indicated they were satisfied with interaction with other students and the overall program.

Implications and Conclusions

The key implication from the Prairie Ph.D. to date is that *it can be done*. A cohort-based, distancedeliveredgraduate program in the biological sciences can be conceptualized and implemented with the unique needs of the tribal college faculty and professionals in mind. Strong leadership, a holistic curriculum, reservation-based research, adherence to highest academic standards, flexibility, and attention to communications and relationships among students and faculty can be keys to success.

Presenters

Timothy J. Nichols serves as an Assistant Director of Academic Programs for the College of Agriculture and Biological Sciences at SDSU. In addition to student recruitment and retention, Dr. Nichols helps coordinate the Prairie Ph.D., and is involved in several other collaborative efforts with indigenous communities, aimed at Native American student success.

Diane H. Rickerl is a Professor of Agroecology and Coordinator of Diversity and Multiculturalism in the College of Agriculture and Biological Sciences at SDSU. An award-winning teacher and researcher, she coordinates the Prairie Ph.D. and organizes domestic and international diversity experiences for students and faculty. Dr. Rickerl also leads several collaborative research projects with the tribal colleges.

Henry S. Miller is Natural Resources Instructor at Nebraska Indian Community College and a student in the Prairie Ph.D. program. In addition to teaching, “Hank” is involved in natural resources research and community outreach. He has previously taught high school science and coached numerous youth athletic teams.